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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, foreign language textbooks have espoused a pragmatic approach to the teaching of language, underscoring the value of communicative competence, functional language use, and conversational effectiveness, while at the same time retaining to some degree the more traditional goals of structural analysis and "knowledge about" language and culture(s). However, the notion of discourse competence, defined here as the ability to understand and produce connected, coherent speech in conversation, has remained relatively neglected by materials writers. The purpose of this paper is to determine to what extent grammatical and rhetorical discourse phenomena are addressed in recent French textbooks that espouse communicative or proficiency approaches. In a small-scale survey of eight widely used elementary and intermediate French textbooks, claims and assumptions about discourse that are reflected in grammar explanation, oral exercises, and samples of text are analyzed. (Author/VWL)

WHERE IS THE TEXT? DISCOURSE COMPETENCE AND THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEXTBOOK

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Abstract

Increasingly, foreign language textbooks have espoused a pragmatic approach to the teaching of language, underscoring the value of communicative competence, functional language use, and conversational effectiveness, while at the same time retaining to some degree the more traditional goals of structural analysis and "knowledge about" language and culture(s). However, the notion of discourse competence, defined here as the ability to understand and produce connected, coherent speech in conversation, has remained relatively neglected by materials writers. The purpose of this paper is to determine to what extent grammatical and rhetorical discourse phenomena are addressed in recent French textbooks which espouse communicative or proficiency approaches. In a small-scale survey of eight widely used elementary and intermediate French textbooks, we analyze the explicit claims and implicit assumptions about discourse which are reflected in grammar explanations, oral exercises, and samples of text. Trends such as chapter organization by speech acts, repertories of gambits and routines, and catalogues of useful expressions for conversation are an encouraging change from the strictly grammatical syllabus. Nevertheless, limitations remain. Initiatives to present language at the discourse level are characterized by the tendency to reduce discourse to lexical phrases, the failure to distinguish clearly between structures and expressions targeted for comprehension and those which students are expected to produce, and the absence of explanations of usage which are informed by native speaker norms governing the use of verb tenses and other structures.

Introduction

For the past ten years or so, beginning and intermediate textbooks have espoused communicative and proficiency approaches. This functional orientation has emphasized contextualization, "real-life" language use and information exchange, structure in the service of communication and meaning, and pragmatics, that is, socially and culturally appropriate language behavior (O'Connor Di Vito 1991: 250; Terrell, 1990: 201). However, one very important aspect of effective communication — discourse competence — remains relatively neglected in textbook materials. By discourse competence we mean the ability to produce and understand those features of extended speech or writing which facilitate connectedness and cohesion, whether in non-interactive report/monologue or in interactive conversation.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how discourse contributes to oral proficiency, and to determine whether or to what extent this important aspect of communication — cohesion in speech and conversation — is directly or indirectly addressed in commercial materials. To this end, we surveyed eight French textbooks (five beginning, three intermediate level), all of which are representative models of communicative or proficiency-based approaches. The textbooks selected for this survey include six widely sold, well known textbooks and two beginning level textbooks which have recently appeared on the market for the first time. The materials reviewed

are, at the first year level, *Allons-y* (third edition, 1992), *Deux Mondes* (1988), *Entre Amis* (1991), and *Situations et contextes* (1990); at the second-year level, *Bravo* (1989), *Du Tac au Tac* (1987), and *Qu'est-ce qui se passe?* (third edition, 1990); and lastly, a program which spans both levels, *French in Action* (1987). In surveying this material (books and accompanying video and/or tape programs), we looked at all program components to determine whether language is represented primarily on the level of sentence or on the level of text.

It is important to note that for the purposes of our analysis, we focused on speaking and listening skills. Discourse competence is an equally important part of reading and writing proficiency and merits the same kind of study. However, we chose to limit the scope of this survey to those skills which usually receive the greater emphasis in beginning and intermediate foreign language classrooms. Furthermore the textbooks in our survey, like most others on the market, give priority to listening and speaking skills.[1]

All of the textbooks reviewed make reference in their prefaces to the importance of proficiency, communicative language use and related concepts such as interaction, strategic competence, socio-linguistic appropriateness, and authentic language. *Deux Mondes*, for example, defines its primary instructional goal as "proficiency in communication skills" (Terrell *et al.* 1988: xi) *Entre Amis* includes "communication-enhancing strategies of both a linguistic and a pragmatic nature" (Oates *et al.* 1991: vii); *French in Action* provides "a flood of authentic French in authentic circumstances" (Capretz et al. 1987: 2); *Allons-y* "allows for maximum interaction among students and between students and instructors...based on tasks to be accomplished and on effective linguistic functioning in real situations" (Bragger and Rice 1992: xv); *Bravo* aims to "provide students with the opportunity to use their language skills in a highly functional way" (Muyskens et al. 1989: ix); *Situations et contextes* asserts that "socio-linguistic appropriateness is as important as linguistic accuracy" (Siskin and Recker 1990: iii); and *Du Tac au Tac* is "organized around the functions needed to interact in conversation, not around situational vocabulary or grammatical features of speech" (Bragger and Rice 1987: v). Interestingly, however, with the exception of *Du Tac au Tac*, none of the textbooks surveyed refers explicitly to discourse, perhaps because the term and concept are less familiar to classroom teachers than the notions of communicative competence and proficiency. Yet discourse features are indispensable to successful and smooth flowing communication. Discourse competence is defined in the Foreign Service Institute (F.S.I.) proficiency factor descriptions for speaking as the ability to communicate in such a way that the "substance of the message is more noticeable than the form." It is one of five factors analyzed in the evaluation of oral proficiency in the F.S.I. test, the other four being interactive comprehension, structural precision, lexicalization, and fluency.[2]

Definition of Discourse

Broadly speaking, discourse refers to language beyond the sentence level. If a sentence expresses an idea (referential or illocutionary), discourse refers to how this idea fits together with other ideas in an interaction or text. Discourse is what makes a passage of speech or writing text (Brown and Yule 1983: 191), whether this text is a conversation between two or more participants, an oral monologue (such as a lecture, briefing, or presentation), an interview, or a written text (such as a story or instructions).

Discourse features include grammatical markers which facilitate cohesion across sentences: pronouns, conjunctions, deictics (such as demonstrative pronouns and adjectives, temporal and spatial adverbial markers — "now," "then," "after," "once," "here") (McCarthy 1991: 35-39). Other discourse features are rhetorical rather than grammatical — "beyond the sentence" elements which mark transitions or separation of main ideas from parenthetical comments. In terms of conversational interaction, discourse features include openings, topic shift markers, gambits, closure markers, and conversation management devices such as clarification requests and repairs (Kramsch 1981: 23-26). At any level, discourse refers to cohesion and sequential organization within a single turn or monologue, or across turns in conversation; discourse features allow speakers and listeners to make sense out of what has been said and to anticipate what is to come. Discourse problems in learners' speech (inappropriate redundancy, for example) often result in lack of flow or continuity, and amount to an inability to maintain one's part in a conversation.

Language teaching materials have reflected the tacit assumption that the learner must move from smaller to larger units, from the word to the sentence to the text. The learner builds in this direction: vocabulary, verb tenses, sentences and then, at the advanced level, texts. However, not all discourse instruction need be reserved exclusively for advanced level students. Even beginning learners can be taught to use certain discourse elements in their speech. Beginning level students often speak using a list of short, discrete sentences. They generally do not have any problem beginning the list, since it is often an answer to a question, such as "What did you do over the weekend?" Their problem is in ending the list. Students do not seem to learn how to signal that they have nothing further to add; they simply stop speaking, and the listener is left hanging. Kramsch, among others, advocates teaching simple conversation management devices to signal such closure (1981: 11). Beginning students also need the kind of language they can use immediately in the target community, such as pointing words ("I want this one, not that one"). In addition, learners need to know when sentence fragments and ellipsis ("John does well in school. Mary does too") are appropriate. A teacher's request that students respond with complete sentences (especially common in beginning level instruction) is usually issued in the interest of reinforcing grammatical structure. However, in language use among native speakers, complete sentences are frequently not appropriate, economical, or smooth rejoinders. If, as instructors, we indiscriminately encourage the use of complete sentences in students' speech, we may actually be fostering awkward expression on their part.

The specific features that come under the rubric of discourse vary according to whether we are talking about spoken or written text. The F.S.I. discourse factor descriptions for speaking provide guidelines for the evaluation of a speaker's discourse competence. Speakers are evaluated, in order of progressive levels of proficiency, for their ability to: (1) produce continuous discourse (making appropriate use of sentence fragments as well as complex syntax); (2) make a point, develop and support ideas, and make transitions between ideas in extended production activities; (3) exhibit appropriate turn-taking behavior; (4) vary syntax and effectively and word order; use rhetorical devices (such as speed changes and intonation); (5) take and hold the floor; open and close discussion; (6) convey attitudinal as well as referential information; (7) and ultimately, realize their communicative intent and bring about desired outcomes.

These guidelines are expressed in terms of production, although comprehension of the interlocutor's speech is implied in some cases. Discourse competence can be expressed in terms

of comprehension/appreciation as well (for example, the ability to understand culture-specific organization of narratives and conversation). This is a point to which we will return further on.

Survey Findings

Almost all textbooks in the survey are organized by speech acts or language functions combined with thematic or situational contexts. Most are organized such that the chapter begins with a speech sample — usually a dialogue/conversation, or sometimes a letter. The dialogue is a privileged place where language is represented, and it is one of the major sources of input which textbooks provide. The dialogue text serves as a *context* — for exercises and vocabulary. But paradoxically, despite its privileged place in the lesson, in most cases the text also remains a **pretext** — for teaching sentence structure, lexical items, or speech act gambits. Vocabulary and structures do not serve as glosses for the text; rather, the text a is pretext for presenting specific language structures.

Although an opening text could and sometimes does serve as a comprehension sample, more often than not, the dialogue is a short, concise text which serves as a model for student *production*. The emphasis on production (vs. reception) which almost all textbooks reflect, results in simplified, idealized speech for students to reproduce. Unfortunately, this goal also dictates a relatively inauthentic conversational sequence. Natural conversational phenomena such as overlap, false starts, repetition, and clarification are understandably not part of the model text. However, as a result, students are consequently deprived of exposure to a number of important discourse features. Consequently, in role play situations they are frequently at a loss for transitional devices, ways to close a conversation, and other conversation management tools.[3]

After the dialogue, the next pedagogical unit in most of the textbooks is a summary of kernel structures and key expressions. These expressions include single words and whole sentences, such as polite requests and appropriate responses. While often reflecting a speech act orientation, these sections remain quite lexical and list-like in nature.

Following the vocabulary/useful phrases component, a grammar section provides explanations of structure. Illustrations of grammar points are most often single sentences. Grammar-oriented exercises also remain at the sentence level, and although increasingly one finds discrete sentences which are contextualized, that is, thematically and sequentially related to one another, these exercises do not constitute continuous text in a discourse sense (Walz 1989: 162).

Following the structural and vocabulary exercises, a common feature is a communicative activities section. Such activities guide the students to use the language they have learned in situations and social contexts. This communicative activities component, along with increasing emphasis on pair work in oral exercises of all kinds, is arguably one of the most successful features of recent textbook writing. If there is a drawback here, it is in some cases an overly ambitious agenda for the student. In *Bravo*, for example, students are provided a short example of a narrative joke in French, and are then directed to tell a joke of their own to the rest of the class. Unfortunately, joke-telling can be an extremely difficult feat even for many native speakers of a language, and intermediate students are quite ill-equipped to cope with such a culturally sophisticated task.

In reviewing these textbooks, we decided to take a closer look at those units dedicated to the extremely important language function of narration. In textbooks, narration is invariably coupled with presentation of *passé composé* and *imparfait* (although in native speaker speech, storytelling often involves extensive use of the present tense as well)[4]. In the beginning level textbooks, an almost identical sequence is followed: introduction of several sample *passé composé* items in the opening dialogue, followed by grammatical explanations with sentence-level examples. Several chapters later, the same format is followed for presentation of *imparfait*. Then, still later, usage of the two tenses together in narration is explained. As anyone who has taught foreign languages knows, it takes a great deal of time and experience and exposure to spoken or written text for speakers to develop competence in this area. However, even in the intermediate level textbooks, there are very few extended samples or stories for students to hear or read. Typically, *imparfait* and *passé composé* in combination are illustrated through short, authored paragraphs; often the sample text is broken up and analyzed for tense usage. Textbook and taped exercises involve sentence transformations and fill-in-the-blank paragraphs. Again, the emphasis is on production, and little exposure to oral or written stories is made available. Students are given sentences and then asked (in communicative activities) to produce text.

Bravo clearly displays an awareness of conversation management needs in storytelling. It provides a three-part conversation sample involving narrative. The *expressions typiques* sections deal with such functions as to how to start up a story, how to connect a series of events, how to wind down or close. Generally, each function is associated with several phrases (e.g. *Tu ne croiras pas ce qui m'est arrivé/You won't believe what).* However, this repertory of phrases is not accompanied by sufficient samples of how these devices are actually used in real conversations. Students are not exposed to enough narrative text. To its credit, on the other hand, *Bravo* places new and highly needed emphasis on listener response, providing students with interesting things to say when they listen and respond to a storyteller.

Qu'est-ce qui se passe? provides students with a shared context for language learning and language use: pictures and picture stories. The syllabus is organized around what the authors term "basic language functions": giving and getting information, designating, qualifying and describing, reacting, explaining, expressing feelings and opinions, and telling stories. But the outstanding feature of the chapter on telling stories is *that there are no stories.*

The textbook is our survey which provides the most extended samples of text is *French in Action*. Indeed, the entire program is organized around a story which continues over fifty-two episodes and is recounted both in audio and written form. From the very first lesson, *French in Action* provides a great deal of text — dialogue, narration, and explanation, as well as expository text in the form of related documents. In fact, the primacy given to text is *French in Action*'s salient feature. The point of departure for language learning is the story itself: language is analyzed to the extent necessary to understand the story as well as talk about the story. The text does not appear to be simply a pretext to illustrate the grammar, lexicon and discourse structures on the agenda. By virtue of its length, attention to discourse is built in. There is a certain narrative momentum that has inherent interest — the story is such that it propels the student to read on, to follow the development of ideas. That is, in order to understand Lesson 36, the student needs to have understood Lesson 35, and so on. Moreover, in *French in Action*, exercises and activities are text-based, although there are few analyses of discourse per se. Rather, there are drills in which adjacency pairs serve as cue and response, text completion exercises drawn

from the story, and role plays, all of which involve reconstituting the text. While there is little explicit analysis of the discourse structure of the text (save for adjacency pairs), exercises and activities are based on the text and bring the student back to the text.

The dialogues in *Qu'est-ce qui se passe?* and *Du Tac au Tac*, by contrast, serve to illustrate the discourse gambits, vocabulary and grammatical elements and functions presented in a given chapter. Exercises do not bring students back to the dialogue text. In *Qu'est-ce qui se passe?*, exercises are built around "reaction gambits" or creation of sentences belonging to the thematic context of the chapter. In contrast to *French in Action*, *Du Tac au Tac* provides a more limited sample of text, despite its express focus on conversation and storytelling. While there is little text, we find a good deal of analysis beyond the sentence level. This analysis, furthermore, focuses on discourse structure (openings, closings, transition markers, speech acts, and so on) rather than on verification of comprehension of content.

How can textbooks provide more text? Audio programs are clearly an ideal vehicle for exposure to oral narrative. Indeed, one of the beginning textbooks surveyed, *Entre Amis*, takes advantage of the medium to provide students with a reading of *Le Petit chaperon rouge* (*Little Red Riding Hood*). The fact that the content of the story might be known frees the listener to pay attention to formal aspects of the narration (in this case, tense usage). This kind of exercise involving real exposure to storytelling is a positive development.

Increasingly beginning and intermediate programs are not just textbooks but rather multi-media packages, including video and visual material as well as the standard audiotapes which provide oral production practice. *Bravo*'s Student Activity Tape, and the listening comprehension component of *Entre Amis*, for example, provide excellent language samples, coupled with interesting tasks for the listener to perform. The length of these samples is an advantage: students are exposed to greater input, and benefit from the redundancy of message which length can provide. Such listening comprehension work is predominantly content-oriented, but in some cases, pragmatic issues — register, level of politeness, or appropriateness — are also addressed. However, while cultural and pragmatic issues are increasingly evident in beginning and intermediate materials, discourse phenomena and conversation management seem to be more specialized concerns, taken up explicitly only in a supplementary text like *Du Tac au Tac*.

In conducting this survey, we found that language in textbooks is most often represented on the sentence level. Where text is provided, with few exceptions it is in very short samples. Students are taught to understand and participate in conversations through imitation of the model dialogue. In addition, they are given a number of gambits and phrases to use in conversation. However, these phrases are often presented out of context, more or less as equivalent items, and in list-like form. Language in these textbooks is analyzed in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and functions, with the greatest emphasis still going to grammar, but with increasing emphasis on speech acts. Grammatical structures are rarely analyzed in terms of their discourse functions. Finally, and most importantly, students are asked on the one hand (in exercises) to manipulate sentences, and on the other hand (in communicative activities) to produce extended speech.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The limitations on teaching discourse competence at the elementary and intermediate levels are that textbooks tend to be (1) production-oriented and (2) sentence-based. ..

Despite the current emphasis on communicative and 'real' language use in foreign language instruction, the sentence remains the traditional unit *par excellence* of textbooks. The recent focus on speech acts is welcome, but it perpetuates the representation of language at the sentence level, or at best, at the adjacency pair level. In the classroom and in textbook materials, high priority is still given to structure and syntax. At the same time, in exercises and role play activities, students are expected to use language effectively beyond the sentence level. Textbooks continue to give students what amounts to vocabulary lists (albeit embellished with gambits and speech acts) as preparation for "real" conversation. In effect we are asking students to produce oral texts (conversations) on the basis of very little textual input. *Where is the text?*

Part of the reason why text is missing is that our focus has been on production, not on comprehension. Textbooks are production-rather than reception-oriented, and the textbooks in our survey (with the notable exceptions of *Deux Mondes*, which promotes the Natural Approach, and *French in Action*) for the most part reflect that orientation. In spite of increased interest in receptive skills and comprehension approaches, commercial materials and classroom teaching continue to privilege speaking. This is understandable: speaking is what most students say they want to do, what gives them the most satisfaction, the greatest feeling of accomplishment. Furthermore, textbooks — a written medium — cannot effectively provide exposure to extended oral speech samples. Ironically, if the textbooks surveyed are any indication, we still expect students to produce language on the basis of very little input or exposure to text. Yet students need to hear and see a great deal of texts. They need to notice how conversations, briefings, interviews, and stories are opened and closed, how transitions are marked, even how oral lists are ordered and closed.

One argument for teaching discourse competence by means of reception is that production activities are frequently frustrating for adult learners (young or old) who have a great deal to say but lack the means with which to express their ideas. Reception activities, such as observing interactive behavior, or analyzing written or aural text for discourse or pragmatic features, allow students to deal with language in a more sophisticated way. In addition to audio and video components, textbooks could certainly provide longer samples of authentic text (writing, or transcripts of speech) for purposes of analysis rather than rehearsed production.[5] It may be useful to understand and appreciate differences between French and American conversational styles and oral narrative structures, for example, even at the beginning level (Wieland 1989).[6]

Another argument for teaching discourse by means of reception activities is that in many instances, it may not be an appropriate goal to encourage students' adoption of French discourse. Changing the culturally specific way in which one tells a story, for example, is not only difficult, but probably not desirable. However, it is extremely helpful for someone who will travel abroad and deal with people from a different culture to understand and appreciate differences of this sort. *French in Action* certainly exploits the possibility of training students to notice features in its videotapes rather than produce them. *Entre Amis* demonstrates a low-key, non-prescriptive approach to language behavior in many of its cultural explanations. For example the authors note

that French people generally respond to compliments by deflecting them or adding information, rather than by directly accepting them. Without insisting on students' adoption of this norm, the authors suggest that it is important to understand the cultural difference, and that it can be "linguistically enjoyable to develop a few rejoinders" which are culturally appropriate (Oates *et al.* 1991: 37).

A shift to developing discourse competence through reception, however, does not mean abandoning production goals, particularly when it comes to working with written exercises. How is a beginning student to learn how to use definite and indefinite articles, pronouns, the *passé composé* or *imparfait*, and so on, if not in textual context? The definite vs. indefinite article in French, so often cast solely in terms of specific vs. general reference, frequently functions in texts to distinguish old or shared information from new information. Similarly, the *c'est/il est* distinction, generally explained in terms of speech acts (identification vs. description) can be treated from the same discourse perspective (new vs. old information).[7] The often used cloze paragraphs, which ostensibly "contextualize" structural or vocabulary items, are generally a series of sentences with frequent lexical/adverbial/verbal cues to signal the appropriate grammatical choice. The cue is usually located immediately before or after the blank, which encourages the student to make the choice based on the immediate structural context rather than on an understanding of global meaning. But for the student, a text with blanks is not a text at all. Visually, it is not readable. Thus, we have yet again an instance of the student being asked to produce text without real textual input.[8]

An increased focus on discourse competence in beginning and intermediate textbooks would encourage us to explore other options for the traditional dialogue as opener. The dialogue can be replaced by extended speech events out of which are excerpted pieces of functional language. It can also be used for listening comprehension exercises. Over the last ten years or so, we have seen an evolution in commercial beginning and intermediate textbooks toward offering "whole" programs: audio/video/computer/written components to teach culture and communication. *Entre Amis*, for example, defines itself as "a communicative, function-based, multi-media program that thoroughly integrates culture and language" (Oates *et al.* 1991: vii) *Allons-y* as a "mutually supporting network of learning components" (Bragger and Rice 1992: xv). The fact that commercial materials now include multi-media components is promising: video and audiotapes are ideal vehicles for exposing students to lengthier oral text. Indeed, it is in these audiotape programs, that is, on the periphery of the total package, that we begin to find extended texts. Lengthier texts require that the student attend to discourse features in the conversation or story in a way that the relatively short dialogue "vocabulary containers" we have come to expect in traditional foreign language textbooks do not. While the written component of the textbooks remains focused on the sentence level, tape programs appear to be improving in terms of focus on text level. We need, then, to encourage both teachers and students to make better and more frequent use of tapes. Our society is still very book-oriented in terms of language teaching and learning. It is our hope that materials writing and classroom practice will increasingly promote access to the extremely important language input which extended text can provide.

Endnotes

1. In his study of textbooks and the teaching of speaking skills, Walz (1986) comments that most of the 22 textbooks in his survey emphasize the speaking skill, and that none gives priority to either reading or writing.

2. The Foreign Service Institute, U.S. Dept. of State, is the only government agency involved in proficiency testing that has further elaborated the general Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) level descriptions by defining five factors for each level of speaking and reading proficiency. Other government agencies work with the ILR global level descriptions only; ACTFL guidelines are also global definitions, adapted from the original ILR descriptions. For further comparison of government and academic testing programs, see Clark and Clifford (1988).

3. In their study of direction-giving in natural conversation and textbook dialogues, Scotton and Bernstein (1988) note that samples of real conversational exchange contain insertion sequences (openings, parenthetical comments, confirmation checks, pre-closings) and discourse features (fillers, incomplete sentences) which are typically missing from textbook models.

4. See O'Connor DiVito (1992) for a discussion of the use of the present tense in narration.

5. In a similar vein, O'Connor Di Vito (1992: 55) recommends that French language teachers emphasize comprehension rather than production exercises on written uses of the historical present, since students are not expected to produce the kind of texts in which this tense usage occurs.

6. For beginning level students Wieland (1989) recommends a focus on comprehension of spoken narratives, and for intermediate and advanced students a shift to attempts at production of narratives.

7. Magnan and Ozzello (1991) have suggested ways to teach a number of grammatical structures at the discourse level, including the *c'est/il est* distinction and *si*-clauses. "Grammar and Meaning: Teaching French at the Discourse Level." For analyses of the use of other grammatical structures in a discourse context, see Péry-Woodley (1991) and Cornish (1991).

8. The following is a useful alternative to the commonly used cloze passages for teaching the use of the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*, and one which helps the student understand their respective discourse functions. First, the students listen to the entire narrative read aloud twice by the teacher. At this point, students do not look at the text. Next, on their own students silently read the text and fill in the blanks. Then, once students have completed the blanks and discussed their choices in class, pairs of students read the entire reconstituted text aloud to each another. As a follow-up to this exercise, students list (1) the events, and (2) the commentary, descriptions, or evaluations in the narrative. The point of the last step is to draw students' attention to discourse functions of the *passé composé* and *imparfait*, that is, the marking of events and background information, respectively, in the narrative.

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